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# COMMENTARY

## TAKING THE LAW FIRM-LY INTO HIS OWN HANDS

Mike Royko\*

[Editor's note: Defeated Republican mayoral candidate Bernard E. Epton, who blamed biased reporting for his loss in last [April's] Chicago election, says he is trying to put together a syndicate to buy the Chicago Sun-Times, which is up for sale. Epton says he would fire columnists Mike Royko and Roger Simon—whom he referred to as "slime"—and political editor Basil Talbott Jr., all of whom he criticized for what he called biased reporting.]

I WAS FEELING like a high roller this morning, so I phoned the famous law firm of Epton Mullin Segal & Druth Ltd. and spoke to one of the partners. After identifying myself, I said, "I would like to make an offer to buy your law firm."

"It's not for sale," he said.

"Not at any price?" I responded.

"Well, I suppose everything is for sale if the price is right."

"Good, then let's talk business," I said.

"No. You are not an acceptable buyer. You are, uh . . ."

"Slime?" I said.

"Yes, slime."

"Well, if my condition improves, can we discuss it further?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

"By the way, I should warn you that if I am successful in buying your law firm, I intend to fire one of your partners. I think you know which one."

"That will be impossible. He is no longer connected with the firm. He just uses an office here."

"Then I will evict him."

"As you see fit. Goodbye."

He seemed surprised that I would want to buy his law firm. And I suppose some readers might also wonder why I want to do such a thing.

But although I've never talked about it before, I've always wanted to own my own law firm.

My reason is simple. I would like to provide the public with at least one law firm they can trust.

By owning my own law firm, I could whip lawyers into shape. At least those I don't fire or evict.

To be specific, here is what I'd do:

If you've ever visited the criminal courts, you've probably seen something really peculiar.

Most of the people accused of committing crimes are innocent. Or at least

they have a lawyer who says so.

You can chop off your grandma's head and use it as a bowling ball in the Tuesday league, and you can find a lawyer in this town who will go into court and insist that you didn't do it.

And if you are dumb enough to admit that you did it, your lawyer will say it was unintentional. Your grandma happened to stick her head in to say hello just when you were slicing salami.

Now, that has always struck me as being a little hard to believe—that most accused cutthroats, back-stabbers, alley-shooters, sneaks, thieves and creeps were either innocent or victims of circumstances.

I mean, somebody has to be committing all those crimes out there.

What it amounts to is that at any given moment, half the lawyers in all of the courtrooms are lying. I can't think of any other profession, except used-car dealer, that has such a disregard for truth.

Not that I would accuse anybody of earning their living in a shabby way—and I wouldn't be so crude as to call it slimy—but trying to keep killers, rapists, stickup men, arsonists and other animals out of jail sure isn't my cup of cocoa.

I realize that I don't work in the most noble of professions, but if some killer or rapist walked into my office and said, "I'd like you to help me stay out of jail," I'd show him the door.

Of course, not all lawyers represent criminals. The more fortunate represent large, rich corporations. And these law firms usually wind up large and rich themselves.

I've seen many cases in which there's evidence that large, rich corporations got large and rich by cheating or exploiting people who are small and not rich.

But who do big, powerful law firms side with? Do they decide to represent small, powerless people?

No. By some coincidence, the big, powerful law firms usually wind up representing the big, rich corporations.

That also strikes me as being strange. Are these big, rich corporations always right? I can't believe that. Nobody is always right. Which is why I've enjoyed picking on some of these large corporations.

So why don't these law firms ever say the obvious:

"Look. The car you were making was junk. In fact, it was downright dangerous. You knew that. So take your millions of dollars in fees and stuff them. I wouldn't represent a louse like you."

Or: "Hey, you're telling me that your company has been dumping dangerous chemical wastes in the rivers and streams and you want me to get you off the hook? I don't need a \$500,000 fee that bad. Go try the legal aid office, you crumb."

Then there is the crime syndicate. Financial wizard Allen Dorfman—before receiving bargain justice from 60 cents' worth of lead—was represented by one of the top law firms in the country.

But if you went to them because your son was caught stealing hubcaps, I'll give 10 to 1 you wouldn't get past the receptionist.

When they're asked about such things, lawyers say that everybody is entitled to a competent legal defense—even murderers, mobsters and corporations that exploit little people. And I can't quarrel with that. It's our legal system.

But I often wonder how lawyers feel when their skills permit somebody who they know is guilty and dangerous to walk back out on the street.

And I also wonder why so many of the brightest lawyers prefer to have rich and powerful clients, rather than somebody who might be more deserving of help—but is afflicted with empty pockets.

Then there's politics. Have you ever noticed how many of our politicians are lawyers? Our aldermen, for example. Only one alderman is an ex-newsperson. Most of the others are lawyers.

It's amazing how many of them have gone to jail in recent years. Maybe the law schools ought to teach a course called "Not Getting Caught II." (With aldermen, it might be a good idea to have a course called "Remedial Not Getting Caught.")

Anyway, that's why I want to buy my own law firm. I would set up certain rules and put them on the door:

- We don't want clients who are a menace to society. Go next door.
- I don't care how rich your corporation is—if you were wrong, don't even knock. Go next door.
- Anybody in this law firm caught running for public office will be fired immediately.

I know, I know. I'd soon go broke.

That's all right. It's never been my ambition to make millions of dollars so I could go to Florida and sit on a balcony and talk self-righteous nonsense.

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